

# DIAL-A-DEATH

## Talk Back To Your Tube

BY GEORGE SHEA

COLUMBUS, Ohio — John and Susan Russell sat before their television set watching a boy of about 10 twirl a baton in a talent contest.

After 40 seconds, the words "touch now" appeared at the bottom on the screen and Susan turned to her husband: "Well, want to give him a yes, John?" she asked. He said good-naturedly, "Give him a yes. We can't vote against the kids."

Susan pressed a button on the box she held by her side attached to the TV set. A few seconds later, figures flashed on the screen indicating that the boy, still performing, had the approval of

83% of the viewing audience. He was allowed to continue.

New figures appeared every five seconds as viewers changed their minds. A drop of the baton brought a drop in the lad's approval percentage. Susan continued to hold down the approval button but at one point warned, "One more drop and we change our vote." She looked at a visitor and acknowledged her mischievousness. "You get real vicious at home," she explained.

The rules are that disapproval of more than 50% of the viewers brings the act to an abrupt halt.

—from a recent Los Angeles Times article on two-way cable TV in Ohio.

Two way TV shows such as these (where the viewers directly influence a show's outcome) may well be the wave of the future. Presently, two-way TV is causing a lot of fuss and excitement in Columbus, Ohio. It's being tested in a \$12 million experiment launched by Warner Cable, a subsidiary of Warner Communications. The new cable TV system is called Qube (pronounced cube. The word doesn't really mean anything). An undisclosed (but apparently enthusiastic) number of Columbus residents have plugged into the Qube system at a base rate of \$10.95 a month.

For this, a Qube subscriber gets access to 30 different TV channels. Some are conventional commercial TV stations any local viewer can get. Some are standard commercial channels piped in from nearby cities such as Cleveland and Indianapolis.

One special cable channel offers a full day of exclusively children's programming; another offers only religious shows. There are separate channels that give printed readouts of news and weather and price comparisons of local shopping market.

Nine additional channels carry pay TV programs. A viewer pays extra for these shows — anywhere from \$2.50 for an Ohio State basketball game to \$1 for an old Marx Brothers movie or \$3.50 for a more recent film such as *Network*.

But the new show that's getting the most attention is *Columbus Alive*, a talk-variety show that features a local two-way version of the *Gong Show*. This is the one where the viewers press that Yes or No button that sustains or terminates the performances of assorted amateur baton twirlers, belly dancers and would-be Howard Cosell impersonators.

Right now, it's carried on only one of the 30 Qube channels, and it's the only two-way TV show in the country. But, observers say, give it time. Some foresee the day (and it may not be far way) when two-way television will be as common as one-way TV is today. Everybody will have it and everybody will be getting (breaking) into the action.

Let's jump ahead to the year 1993. Two-way TV has, by now, gone totally national. Everybody has it, and everybody's playing it all the time.

A couple is watching *Baretta*. The show has somehow survived all the ratings wars and cancellation threats. Robert Blake, a little older, a little slower, a lot paunchier, is still out on the hustings killing and busting for 60 action-packed minutes a week.

It's now minute 53. A slimy, slobbering psychotic killer holds a computerized butcher knife to the throat of a young woman undercover cop. In his other hand he grasps a .357 Magnum. A few feet away, a second slobbering killer cradles a loaded sawed-off shotgun. Any second now, Baretta will burst in the door, gun in hand. The dialogue runs as follows:

Killer B: (the shotgun wielder) Hey, Grundge, that phone call really fooled Baretta. He's on his way over here right now! (Baretta dialogue has changed remarkably little in 15 years.)

Killer A: (butcher knife & Magnum) Great! Haw! Haw! (to the Woman Cop) Ya think yer friend Baretta's gonna save ya! Fat chance! He comes through dat door an' I stick dis knife in yer neck an' we empty our guns into his ugly punk cop face! Haw! Haw!

Woman Cop: We'll see about that. Baretta's not so dumb as you guys think.

Killer A: (Afraid, defensive) Whadya mean?!

Cut to Baretta, gun in hand. He's charging up the stairs. He's about to burst through the door.

Suddenly the action stops — freezes. Four viewer choices are flashed on the screen:

- |                        |                     |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. KILLER A DIES       | 2. KILLER B KILLED  |
| KILLER B WOUNDED       | KILLER A WOUNDED    |
| 3. BOTH KILLERS KILLED | 4. EVERYBODY KILLED |

The couple has 20 seconds to choose.

"What do you say, Hon?" says the husband. "You want to let the guy with the shotgun live?"

"I don't know. He was pretty mean to that blind newsdealer. I'm tired tonight. Why don't we just kill both of them?"

"I guess you're right," says the husband. He presses the button for option number 3.

Neither he nor his wife has seriously considered option number 4 (EVERYBODY KILLED) since it would mean the immediate cancellation of the series.

Back to the action. The vote is tabulated. The result is not immediately announced. Instead, we first watch the will of the majority played out on the screen.

Baretta bursts through the door. He drops to the floor. His first shots bring down the shotgun wielder (Killer B). The Woman breaks free and karate chops Killer A on his butcher knife hand. He drops the knife, but retains the Magnum. He fires wildly, two shots that rip away huge chunks of the floor and wall but miss Baretta.

Baretta fires two more shots. Killer A drops to the floor. Baretta and the femme cop embrace in the center of the room. Baretta glances shyly around at the two men on the floor. Neither is moving. Both are obviously quite dead. Option number 3 has triumphed.

Baretta: Sorry, I hadda do dat. But a guy's gotta do his job. Aw . . . those two punks . . .

Woman Cop: They were no good. They got what they deserved.

Baretta: Sure.

After the commercial and the fade-out, the voting results are flashed on the screen:

- |                          |                              |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. KILLER A KILLED 19.2% | 3. BOTH KILLERS KILLED 58.7% |
| KILLER B WOUNDED         |                              |
| 2. KILLER B KILLED 11.3% | 4. EVERYBODY KILLED 10.8%    |
| KILLER A WOUNDED         |                              |

"Hey, how do you like that, Honey? We called it right again," says our husband. And our couple goes to bed happy and satisfied — vindicated. Democracy (and electronic trigger action justice) have triumphed again.

But all is not so happy over at the network. There's that 10.8% of the audience who voted to see everybody snuffed out. It's the first time the vote for the Total Death Option has ever exceeded 10.0%. There's an emergency meeting about it at ABC the next morning.

"10.8 per cent! What's wrong with people?!" an anxious executive inquires rhetorically. "What are they — animals?! Now they want to kill Bobby and the girl?! Don't we give them enough blood night after night? Now they have to start taking away our jobs too?!!!"

Just how far-fetched is this scenario? Probably not very. One-way television has been with



us for 20 years now. Given the marketing philosophy of the medium (Give The Public What It Wants) and the misuses to which we've put it in its first 30 years, it seems highly unlikely that TV will turn itself out much differently over the next 30.

Violence as entertainment is popular, has been popular, and barring any sudden changes in our collective consciousness (i.e. preferences) it will probably go on being popular.

Too bad. But there it very likely will be, but with one very important difference. The viewer's relationship to televised violence will no longer be passive. It will become active. Violence will no longer be something to merely watch and enjoy, it will be a dramatized opportunity to actively choose.

In the comfort of their living rooms, people will order killings as casually as they order pizzas or songs on a juke box. Everybody will get a chance to play electronic Godfather. A cable TV exec has recently joked about the new system's possibilities: "It's the Roman arena all over again." It is — or it will be. And it will be carried to its ultimate technological perfection.

Arthur Miller can graciously retire and stop penning all those turgid moral dramas about collective guilt. The next time around — with one flick of the finger — we really all will be guilty.

No kidding.

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